No. 25

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"You'll stay and go to the dance with me," Gloria coaxed. "I promise you that you will have the time of your life."
R. of M. G., No. 25.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

MARK Sperber might prove a most desirable friend in case of need. But here Alice forced her train of thought into another channel. Richard Courtenay, the handsome movie star, was coming to take dinner with her that evening. Her heart, once more thirsting for romance instead of money, gave a violent leap.

Her soul cried out for him, while cold, calculating reason turned backward to the table on the White Lambs Club veranda—and Mark Sperber.

Chapter 79

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

PHILIP GORDON felt no resentment at his wife's sudden departure from Oak Manor. He knew well enough that she would have gone in spite of his objections, had he raised any. It was not so easy, however, to convince himself that he had acted wisely in permitting Alice to go to Hollywood at this time.

They had parted like enemies, and there had been an expression on her face he had never seen there before. What if she should forget herself to the extent of bringing reproach upon his name? She was quite capable of it.

It was only natural that he should want to unburden his heavy heart to someone. After dinner that even-

ing he coaxed his father-in-law to take a stroll with him through the grounds.

A few minutes later found them seated together on one of the comfortable benches.

"I suppose you heard that Alice has gone to Hollywood to spend a month with an old schoolmate of hers, haven't you, dad?" Gordon began, puffing vigorously at his cigar.

"Yes," old John Procter admitted gruffly.

"Did she say goodby to you? asked the younger man.

"She did that, Phil. But she didn't give me time to deliver the lecture I had prepared for her. Why didn't you come and tell me about her cruel neglect? That baby's life might have been saved if——"

"I know—I know," Gordon interrupted, his eyes fixed on the ground. "But why should I come to you day after day with our troubles? I was in the hope that you would remain in ignorance of that affair. If you don't mind," he added after a pause, "I would like to hear who told you why the baby passed away so suddenly."

"Who told me?" the older man uttered a discordant laugh. "Do you suppose that such an unnatural conduct on the part of a mother escapes attention? Why every servant in the house is discussing it.

"Oh, God, what have I done that I should be punished with such a daughter. Phil, if it were not for you, I'd have disowned her long ago and cut her off without a single penny."

Gordon reached over and laid a gentle hand on the other's shoulder.

John Procter sat with his head bowed. His wrinkled features mirrored the grief which tortured his soul.

"Try not to take it too much to heart, dad," Phil said soothingly. "I have not yet given up all hope.

There must still be some good in Alice."

"Good in her?" the father snorted. "Not a damned bit of it. I know her too well, my boy and I dread to think what her fate will be. My only prayer is that I may not live to see it."

Philip Gordon was patting the old man's arm affectionately. Both had been made to suffer at the hands of the woman they should love, but couldn't.

"What have I to live for now?" John Procter complained bitterly. "Alice is nothing to me, and I am less than nothing to her. She has made that plain upon several occasions. What a miserable fool I was to drive Betty from my home that night when she came home and told me of her marriage to Bob Harding. Betty had always been my one joy and pleasure.

"She was sweetness and gentleness personified. But I cast her off in that cursed pride of mine. Ah, I would gladly give every dollar I own to know that my Betty is still alive. Alice has tried to make me believe that she is dead—that she committed suicide, but I refuse to believe it.

"Betty is still alive, I feel it here," and he pressed his trembling hand to his breast. "God grant that I may see her again before I die."

The poor old man's sorrow was indeed pitiable.

But no words Phil might utter in his deep compassion could alleviate that sorrow. After a space of silence he said:

"Have you tried to find Betty after she left your home, dad?"

"I have," replied the other. "But I am afraid I delayed it too long. Betty and her young husband left Chicago and no trace of them could be found. When she married against my will, I determined that she should not have one penny of my money.

"Urged by Alice I changed my will, bequeathing everything to my oldest daughter. That is something I often regretted.

"Although the chances are remote, but if Betty should turn up after I am gone, she would be beggared and dependent upon Alice for subsistance. Well, you can imagine, Phil, from what you know of Alice's treatment of her own child, how poor Betty would fare."

"That part of your worry could be removed very easily," Phil suggested. "Make a new will, dividing your estate equally between Betty and Alice. Set a certain time, say ten or twenty years, and if Betty is not found within that time, it would be practically certain that she is no longer alive, and her unclaimed portion would go to Alice."

The old man nodded his gray head repeatedly. Even the ghost of a smile crossed his wrinkled face.

"It shall be done at once, Phil," he exclaimed. "I don't know why, but lately I have been dreaming so often of Betty. Often I saw her with that sweet smile and felt the gentle touch of her hand. God grant that she is still alive. I wronged her cruelly and I will at least make what reparation I can now."

The matter was discussed at length and Gordon agreed to have his attorney come to Oak Manor the following day to draw up a new will for his father-in-law.

Arm in arm they returned to the house when the dew began to fall and the cool atmosphere caused the old gentleman to cough slightly.

That night they both slept with thoughts of what the future would bring.

Philip Gordon arose early the next morning, his mind busy with plans for the day.

Although he left for his office in Chicago a little sooner than usual he found a caller waiting for him. A

middle aged man, dressed in the somber garb of a minister of the gospel rose to greet him.

"You are Mr. Gordon, I presume?" the stranger said, holding out his hand.

"I am," Phil admitted with a frank smile. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Mr. Gordon, I am Dr. Stanley, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Gary, Indiana," the other replied thus introducing himself.

"Oh, yes," Gordon exclaimed, his features lighting up, "I wrote you a letter a few weeks ago. I suppose your visit is in connection with that. I hope you have given the matter your earnest consideration and talked it over with the elders of your church."

"I have," the minister said, resuming his seat as Phil drew up a chair. "They all agree that your request should be granted. As a rule we do not permit the opening of a grave in the cemetery which is the sole property of our church. But in your case an exception is to be made. You may remove your late wife's body and place it in your family vault as you suggested in your letter."

"That is very kind of all you gentlemen," Phil answered, a slight tremor in his voice. "I assure you, I am deeply grateful."

Dr. Stanley inclined his head in acknowledgement of the thanks thus expressed. But there was much more to be said, and he had come all the way from Gary Indiana to say it.

"There are some things to explain which could not be done satisfactorily in a return letter, my dear Mr. Gordon," he went on. "You have been under the belief that your wife was buried in the churchyard of the First Presbyterian Church at Gary. Well, this is not the case."

For a moment Phil's heart stopped beating. A

mighty tumult rose within him. Good God, what did this mean? His hand shook as he moved his chair a little closer to that of his visitor.

"Why, I do not understand you, Dr. Stanley," he said hoarsely.

"Well, in order to make things clear to you," the other retorted, "let us go back to the day on which, as you believe, your first wife was killed. The reports show that the body of a woman was found—totally unrecognizable— but nevertheless identified as that of your wife. But does this absolutely prove that the body was that of your wife?"

Phil Gordon's face was white and drawn.

"Do—do you mean to say that—that Marie—that my first wife is still alive?" he gasped brokenly.

"I do not mean to claim that because I am not in a position to do that," the minister of the gospel declared. "But this much is certain—the woman who was killed at that terrible explosion was not your wife!"

With an audible groan Phil clasped his hands together and sat as if turned to stone. He was gazing at the speaker with horrified, incredulous eyes.

"How—how do you know that?" he said in a voice that sounded strange to his own ears.

"Did you read the details of the explosion in the newspapers at the time they were printed?" Dr. Stanley inquired.

"I did not," replied the other.

"Well," the clergyman continued, "a number of men were killed instantly. Several women, presumably stenographers in the steel plant, were seriously injured. The woman who lost her life was supposed to be the governess employed by the owner of the steel mill. Although going by an assumed name, it was later discovered that she was the former Mrs. Gordon of Chicago.

"A few days before I received your letter a poorly dressed woman came to me. She was from Chicago. Amid a shower of tears she told me a story about a wayward daughter who had eloped with a young man. She had traced them as far as Gary, where the latter was employed.

"She had received an anonymous message stating that her daughter was dead, and that she had perished in the explosion at the Gary steel mills. There is no record that she was employed at the steel mills.

"Yet it might have been possible that she happened to be near and was crushed to death by falling walls. An investigation proved that the dead body was found buried by brick and other debris.

"The woman begged me to have the body exhumed. When this was done, she identified it as that of her wayward daughter. She identified it by a scar on the right arm and a birth-mark in the shape of a mouse on the thigh. With this question solved, there still remained another. What became of your wife?"

Philip Gordon changed his position. Mute agony was written all over his features.

"You—you came here to tell me that — that my first wife was never buried in the First Presbyterian Church cemetery," he exclaimed, his hands moving restlessly and aimlessly about. "If that is the case, she could not have been killed in the explosion."

"She wasn't," the other reiterated. "As soon as I received your letter, I at once began to make inquiries. I did not want to bother you until I was sure of my ground.

"Finally I discovered that among the injured who had been removed to the hospital, there was a young woman whose name and origin were unknown. The nurse at the hospital remembered this particular patient

very well.

"The poor woman's face had been horribly mutilated and she seemed to suffer from a deranged mind. All efforts to find who she was proved fruitless. The physicians worked wonders, however. Through a clever bit of surgery they rebuilt her features.

"Even though her physical condition continued to improve, se appeared to be very melancholy. The nurse claimed that she heard this woman bemoan her fate and expressed a wish to die.

"She was caught once attempting to do away with herself by swallowing all the medicines standing on the little table near her cot. They pulled her through, and again she relapsed into a state of utter mental lethargy.

"Then suddenly—it happened one night—this patient was missed. The hospital authorities took it for granted that she had fled in order to carry out her plan of self-destruction. They had every reason to believe that this had come to pass.

"However, this was by no means an established fact. It is therefore not impossible that this unfortunate woman may still be alive. In her mentally deranged state she may have wandered off and found refuge in some institution where she still may be with her identity unestablished."

Deep silence followed as the minister finished speaking. If he expected a reply he was doomed to disappointment.

Philip Gordon sat, staring into space like a man suddenly bereft of his reason. Several times his lips moved, but it seemed he could not frame the words he meant to utter.

"Dr. Stanley," he said at last, trying to swallow the big lump in his throat. "I hardly know what to say to you. Perhaps no man did a woman a greater wrong

than I did to my first wife. If you'll have the patience to listen to me—and please do, for it will relieve my overburdened heart—I shall appreciate it very much."

The minister extended his hand somewhat impulsively:

"My dear Mr. Gordon," he responded, genuine sympathy in his voice and manner, "you may speak without reserve and I shall be glad to listen. I know something about the unhappy ending of your first marriage. Gossips spread ugly rumors about her at the time. I was shocked——"

"I alone was responsible for these rumors," Phil broke in remorsefully. "I was the first one to believe the worst, and drove her from my house. Since then I have learned the truth. Marie was absolutely innocent. Oh, if I were only sure that there was a possibility of her being still alive, I'd move heaven and earth in order to find her."

Dr. Stanley shook his head doubtfully as he remarked quietly:

"The chances are very remote. These days when even small town newspapers seize every opportunity which might furnish some sensational reading, they would surely not overlook one so pregnant with mystery.

"If this unhappy, demented woman, cured physically at the Gary hospital was really your first wife, she could not remain in hiding very long without being detected.

"If, after her escape, she sought refuge in some private home or an institution, the air of mystery with which she surrounded herself, and her inability or refusal to be inidentified, would at once have aroused suspicion.

"Some enterprising newspaper reporter would have gotten a hold of the facts, and printed a photograph of the woman with more fanciful story.

"We see that sort of thing every now and then," the clergyman ended. "Those articles are usually headed "Woman of Mystery living at such and such a place'. And in that way the entire surrounding country would come to know of it.

"Personally I am firmly in the belief that this woman so obviously distracted, made good her threat and took her own life immediately after she escaped from the hospital."

With a groan Gordon buried his face in his hands. His mind could not grasp the thought that Marie had been driven to that extreme. If that was the case he was indeed her murderer.

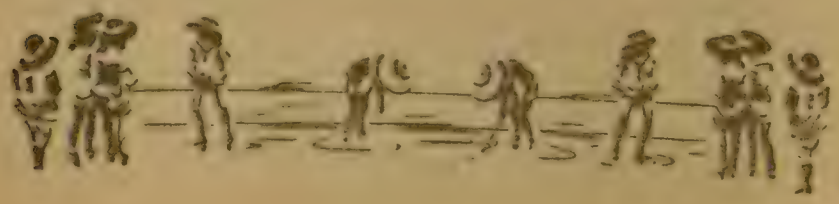
"I shall begin search at once," he said as soon as he was able to speak without breaking down. "The starting point will be Gary, Indiana. I will put the matter in the hands of the best detective agency in the country. I will not rest until I know positively whether Marie is still alive or dead."

"You will have my assistance and my earnest prayer for success." Dr. Stanley replied feelingly. "Call on me any time you wish."

Both men were on their feet now with hands gripped.

After the clergyman was gone, Phil Gordon began pacing the floor with but one thought in his mind.

He must trace every movement of his first wife from the hour he forced her to leave his home on that never-to-be-forgotten night.



Chapter 80

IN TERRIBLE DANGER.

GUY FILLMORE sensed danger when he stood, with Ruth Gordon cowering behind him, at the door of that dilapidated old farm house. But driven by dire necessity he was determined to find the means of extricating himself and the girl he loved from their present and most embarrassing position.

They were out alone in the dead hours of night without a chance of reaching Bar Harbor unless gas could be procured.

Ruth would be utterly compromised if he did not bring her home until the next day. He knew what society gossips at Bar Harbor were capable of.

An affair like this, coming close upon the heels of the double tragedy would indeed give them a chance to wag their tongues.

The man who opened the door was a most disreputable looking individual. He glared for a moment at the evidently unexpected visitor, then attempted to bar the entrance.

But young Fillmore was desperate. He not only resented that sort of a reception, but something told him that this place needed inspection.

And being by nature a curious young man, with plenty of courage and daring to back it up, he acted upon his mad impulse.

"No, you don't, my friend," he said, then swiftly thrust his foot forward. "Let's have a close look at you."

The hall in which he made his assault was pitch

dark. Ruth Gordon still outside, could hear the sounds of a continued struggle, which seemed to last an eternity and ended with a grunt of pain. Then she heard Guy Fillmore's voice.

"Come in quick and make a light, Ruth," he called.

Ruth Gordon obeyed with her knees shaking.

She fumbled about the table near the window for a moment, found a box of matches, and the next instant the room was illuminated.

"Alright now," commanded the young man. "Don't get excited, Ruth. Just take that lamp and enter the next room. I've got this fellow well in hand. We'll follow."

As the girl did as she was told, Fillmore propelled his prisoner before him into what might be called a living room. As he kicked the door shut behind him, she caught the first glimpse of the inhospitable host.

"Oh!" she gasped, with an involuntary shudder.

He was a villainous looking big brute with a stubby beard and unkempt hair. And almost a gaint in size.

She gazed with open admiration at Guy Fillmore's slender figure, wondering how he had managed to subdue this man.

"Now go through this fellow's hip pocket and extract the automatic gun you'll find there, Ruth," was the young man's next order.

Once more the girl obeyed.

At this the giant unleashed a flow of profanity that made Ruth, modern though she was, feel the impulse to put her hands to her pretty ears.

"Don't let that worry you," Fillmore laughed. "I could stop him, but time presses." He glanced quickly about the room and added: "Give me that gun and get that rope over there in the corner, then see if you can tie up this fellow's ankles."

This was a task lovely Ruth Gordon had never before been called upon to do. But she went to it with a will. When it was completed Guy Fillmore brought the big brute down on the floor with a crash.

Before she could catch her breath, the young man had hurled himself upon his adversary.

She watched him wide eyed as he brought the butt of the automatic gun down upon the giant's head with a force that made her turn sick. But she did not yield to the impulse to scream.

"More rope," Fillmore said quietly.

She supplied it and watched while Guy tied up the man's hands and feet. She was the kind of a girl that always craves for action, but things were happening too fast for her this night.

"He'll never come closer to death than he did then," commented Fillmore grimly, as he rose and surveyed his unconscious foe. "I don't know yet why I did not shoot him and have it over with."

"Are you sure he isn't dead anyway?" Ruth asked.

"His head is thick, and you could never kill his type that way," he answered with a grin. "I am really sorry I placed you in such danger. He——"

"But what happened?" Ruth demanded, bewildered.

"That brute was about to kick you in the face with those heavy boots of his," Guy explained. "I thought I had him well subdued. But that is the way with these dope fiends."

"Dope fiends?" echoed the girl.

"Yes, he is one. I caught a whiff of his breath as he opened the door. Like the rest who use the drug, he is a dangerous customer and——"

Young Fillmore stopped short. An automobile was approaching the farm house. The roaring of the

engine could be plainly heard. A moment later a spotlight flashed its beam through the windows. Then came silence and mens' rough voices.

New danger threatened. It was impossible to leave the house at this juncture. Fillmore realized this.

"Quick!" he whispered and snatched Ruth's hand. "They are headed for this room. Let's hide upstairs."

They found the stairway after some swift moving about in the hall. The room they entered on the second floor was very dark. Guy Fillmore had his arm about the girl, who clung to him, shivering with fright.

Both were listening.

"What the devil is the matter?" boomed a loud voice from below. "The door is wide open."

"I guess Bill is full of dope again," came another voice disgustedly. "You can never trust that saphead. He always does the wrong thing at the right time. Trust him for that."

Guy Fillmore pressed Ruth a little closer.

The darkness seemed less dense now that their eyes had accustomed themselves ti it, and he caught a glimpse of her white face as she glanced up at him.

He became conscious then of how closely he held her.

"Sh—h!" he whispered when she stirred. "Don't move!"

Ruth didn't. She came closer if anything, for that big voice from below boomed again.

"Well, I'll be damned!" it exclaimed. "Somebody must have been here!"

The two men evidently had entered the living room and found their comrade lying on the floor securely tied and unconscious. Guy Fillmore guessed that much.

But he could not help shiver a little as he pondered over their predicament.

Those fellows down there must be either bootleggers or hi-jackers. Both of those species were fit for anything.

They plied a trade which brought out the worst in men. When drunk with moonshine they did not kill only to protect themselves when cornered. They killed because it gave them a kick.

He shuddered to think what would happen if a beautiful young girl like Ruth got into their clutches. He squeezed her and her white features flashed a smile through the darkness.

Guy Fillmore had been the best fullback at Harvard. He was lithe as a panther with muscles of steel.

In a hand-to-hand conflict without weapons he had no fear of those men downstairs. But he knew only too well that such brutes scorn a fair fight.

"I wonder who was here?" one of the men asked below. "It couldn't have been the Bar Harbor gang."

"Well, whoever it was, they at least left Bill's automatic behind," the other retorted. "And they did not get away with any of the stuff. It is all here. I guess we arrived just in time to scare them off."

Then Guy Fillmore realized what a fool he had been to leave that automatic gun downstairs.

His own he had placed in the side pocket of his car and forgot to bring it with him. Very softly he breathed an oath. God, if he only had a reliable gun now!

"You saw those two cars on the road," one of the men said. "I guess they parked them there. But that isn't like the Bar Harbor gang to run——"

"Pour a bucket of water on Bill and bring him to," the booming voice cut in with a vile curse. "There is something funny about this business here. I am going to take a look around."

Guy Fillmore clenched his hands, not with fear,

but with rage.

As those men spoke about the two cars being parked out there in the road, it suddenly occurred to him that this dangerous situation could have been avoided.

It was true that Ruth Gordon's car was helplessly stalled and would have to be towed in.

It was true that he was guilty of a neglect such as had never happened before when he failed to see to it that his tank was filled with gas before he started out chasing Ruth.

But it was true—sickeningly true, that he could have drawn the gas from the tank of Ruth's car and driven home without bringing the girl into a mess like this. What the outcome would be he was actually afraid to guess.

The girl's low voice gave him a sudden shock.

"Are—are we in danger?" she whispered.

"No, but I'd give five years of my life to have my gun," he told her.

"Would you—would you kill those men, Guy?"

"Not unless I'd have to, dear," he replied with a sharp intake of his breath. "But I am afraid nothing else would do now."

She remained silent for a moment during which the men on the ground floor could be heard talking in a low tone. They evidently had grown suspicious and were on their guard.

"Do you—do you think they would kill us if they find us here?" the girl asked, snuggling against Fillmore's breast.

"They do worse things to—to a woman sometimes," the latter said. "Now, please don't be frightened," he added quickly. "I ought not to have mentioned that. But they'll never lay a hand on you while I am still able to fight. I am glad it is dark in here."

"But what if they come up with the lamp?" Ruth suggested, shuddering.

"I'll smash it before they get a chance to enter this room," he answered confidently. "In the dark I'll give them both a battle."

Something like a sob broke from the girl's lips. He could feel how her heart beat against his. With a tender motion he lifted her chin and forced her face upward. He drew his hand over her eyes without finding any tears.

The girl was actually smiling in a situation that would have made the average woman hysterical.

"You're a game kid," he said, stroking her cheek gently.

"I am not afraid as long as I am with you, Guy," she whispered. "I'll fight with you if it must be."

"No, you don't," he objected. "I'll do all of that. In case of a personal conflict you keep in the background and do just as I tell you. If I tell you to run, don't hesitate a moment. And don't scream until you reach the outside. Then let loose with all your might. A passing automobilist will hear you and stop."

"But what will you be doing that time, dear?" the girl wanted to know.

"I'll be having some fine physical exercise I am thinking," Fillmore replied with a low laugh. "It will remind me of some of the tussles we had trying to defeat Yale. And I'll win," he added as an afterthought. "I'll beat those roughnecks to a pulp."

Again silence fell between them. Voices were no longer audible from below, but instead they heard the stamping of heavy feet on the stairs.

Fillmore held the girl closer, his mind keenly alert. Ruth's face was now so close to his that he felt her breath on his cheeks. Then something moist touched him. He

knew it was a tear.

"Please don't give way now," he begged. "We'll get out of this alright, Ruth."

"I—I can't bear the thought of you being hurt," she sobbed very quietly. "And I am so sorry I was nasty to you last night, Guy. Say that you forgive me."

"With all my heart!" he whispered. "I love you!"

"And I love you more than my life!" the girl responded, offering him her lips.

No kiss was ever given and returned under more trying, more dramatic circumstances. It was the kiss that sealed their future and bound them together with cords no human hands could loosen.

For the kiss Ruth Gordon received could leave no woman just as it found her.

And then, suddenly, they were brought of that moment of unspeakable bliss. They were again, and more forcibly reminded of the danger which now lurked only a few feet away.

Guy Fillmore straightened up and put the girl behind him.

Chapter 81

CHILLED LOVE.

THE ANXIOUSLY awaited hour had come at last. Alice Gordon was putting the last touches on her toilet. In the kitchen the servants were busy putting the last touches on the dinner. Richard Courtenay, credited with being the handsomest man in Hollywood, was expected to arrive any minute.

The woman took infinite pains to make herself look as attractive as possible. The servants had been ordered to the same to the dinner. The result in both instances was eminently satisfactory.

Alice, endowed by nature with sufficient womanly charms, required but few of the artifices purchased at the corner drugstore.

She had the figure, the complexion and the hair. Ah, what a wonderful creature she would have been if her character was as perfect as her body.

Richard Courtenay, often called the most dangerous man in Hollywood so far as women were concerned, was the peer of his sex in physical attainments. He was not only handsome. He was fascinating.

In addition he possessed the suavity and manners of a knight of old. Tactful and considerate, he rarely made the mistake of forcing his presence upon man or woman.

The women went after him with a vengeance. But it must be said to his credit that he never took unfair advantage of a single one.

If they insisted upon giving and he took, the blame was theirs more than his. In the case of Alice Gordon,

Gloria Marsdon was responsible for bringing them together.

When Richard Courtenay arrived and found Mrs. Gordon awaiting him in the drawing room, he was, for the moment, overwhelmed with her beauty.

Yes, she was lovely enough to justify any madness. With his characteristic impetuosity he ran up to her, both arms extended.

"This is the happiest hour of my life!" he cried. "Ah, if you knew how my soul craves for you!"

She evaded him skillfully, and with a light laugh.

"Dinner is ready, and my body craves for food," she told him. "Your soul-hunger must remain unappeased for the present."

He was somewhat taken aback by this prosaic response. He had expected that, like so many others, she would throw herself into his arms and yield to the embrace and the kisses hot on his lips. This situation was entirely new to him.

As she indicated the dining room and stepped through the door, he followed her with a puzzled look on his face.

The dinner had lost its flavor for Richard Courtenay because this woman insisted upon being impersonal. She refused to flatter him as so many others had done.

But as they went to the library after they had eaten, he saw that her hands were shaking badly and that she could not control the heartbeats that shook her whole body. That was his cue.

"Alice—Alice, I love you!" he cried. "Come here, you were made for me!"

She did not have to come to him because he already had her in his arms and he was kissing her over and over again. She lay passively with her eyes hidden.

"You — you are cold — unresponsive," he com-

plained. "You have not kissed me once."

"I know—I know. I mustn't," she answered with a little shiver. "This thing must come to an end, Richard. I am going back to Chicago to-morrow. It is better so for both of us."

The movie star's black head jerked back. Their eyes met with that strange, cold sex antagonism that comes with the hottest flames.

"Why — why must you go, sweet?" he asked, a catch in his breath.

"My husband needs me."

"Your husband?"

She nodded and walked over to the window. There was a cunning expression in her eyes but Courtenay did not see it. Then she turned swiftly and said:

"Yes, my husband. Surely you know that this thing could not go on now. I am not as vile as that. If I were divorced and free to follow my own inclination, things might be different. And even then, I have my own future to consider."

A hint was contained in what she said, and the man instantly grasped what she was driving at. In the next sentence she made it more plain.

"Richard," she murmured, coming toward him, "do you love me enough to want to marry me—that is if I were free?"

"Why, I have never thought of marrying any woman," he confessed frankly.

"And yet, you would want me to——" Alice apused abruptly as he silenced her with a gesture.

There was just one thing in the world that swept Richard Courtenay from every selfish, indulgent desire that moored him, and that was courage. He was not a good man, but he had courage and idolized it.

The man who fights a thousand feet in the air and

laughs as he fights is a brave man, though he be a bad one.

Besides courage he had frankness. He never shrank from uttering the truth if an occasion demanded it in the presence of a woman.

"Alice," he began, brushing his black hair back repeatedly, "I am going to say something that will hurt you. A moment ago, you asked me if I loved you enough to want to marry you if you were free. My answer to that in all frankness must be 'no.' I am not capable of loving any woman to that extent.

"I shall not suffer much to lose you, but I may regret my lost pleasure. But I have read you, I think. You are not in love with me. You only think so. You were blinded by passion—most women I meet, are.

"Wives like you get caught not by the man only, but by the tricks he employes. You fall for his flattery. He tells you nice things and you believe them. Whatever my shortcomings may be, I am not craven enough to lead you to believe things that could never come to pass.

"I would not take what you might offer me, under false pretenses. It is only fair that you should know just what kind of a man I am. No matter what my short comings are, you must admit at least that I am frank."

Mrs. Gordon made no reply because words failed her utterly. She had not dreamed of being undelusioned in such a frank and almost brutal manner.

At her feet lay a romance shattered into a thousand fragments.

And yet, had she not killed it with her own selfishness and cunning? She did not know whether to like or hate Richard Courtenay for his frankness.

"What a strange man you are," she cried suddenly, pride coming to her rescue. "At that you are not a

bit different than the rest of your sex. You all jump at the wrong conclusion where a woman is concerned. Why I was only teasing you.

"I would not marry again even though I were free to do so. No, thank you," she added with a low laugh, "one matrimonial venture has spoiled the desire for a second. This is a perfectly frank and truthful statement. The woman who marries the second time after one matrimonial failure, is a fool."

He stared at her, wide-eyed. He saw the smile on her lovely face, but he saw also that the woman's eyes were hard.

Before he could speak the telephone bell rang and Alice went into the hall to answer.

"Hello, dearie," came Gloria Marsdon's clear voice. "I am through at the studio. May I come home?"

"Why not?" Alice countered brusquely.

"Oh, I thought you and Richard might not want to be disturbed," came back with a little laugh.

"Mr. Courtenay is leaving now, Gloria," Mrs. Gordon shouted into the transmitter, then glanced toward the library to see if the door stood open. "Yes, he is leaving, and we both enjoyed the dinner very much."

Without waiting to hear more, Alice placed the receiver back on the hook and rose.

As she fully expected and desired, Courtenay was drawing on his gloves, preparing to leave. His face was flushed and his lean jaw was working visibly.

He looked like a man battling with the effects of an insult.

"It has been a pleasure to know you, Mrs. Gordon," he said with icy politeness. "If you are leaving for home to-morrow, allow me to send my best wishes to your husband."

She smiled at his exaggerated bow, then pro-

ceeded him to the door without saying anything in reply.

When he had gone, Alice returned to the library and began pacing the floor. Hollywood did not look quite so attractive now. Richard Courtenay had spoiled it for her.

But underneath her disturbed feelings was the consciousness of having played the fool.

Gloria Marsdon's arrival rescued her from a most painful reverie. The movie star bounced into the room, expectant and surprised.

"What's happened between you and Dick?" she asked, taking her friend's face between her hands and gazing into her eyes. "When you told me over the phone that he was leaving, I couldn't believe it. Is he really gone?"

"Yes, he left a little earlier because I invited him to," Alice replied.

"You—you invited him to?" Gloria repeated. "Why?"

"Oh, I thought it was time for him to go home," came back with a peculiar laugh. "Late hours aren't good for boys like him."

"Did you two quarrel?" the other wanted to know.

"Not at all," came back quickly. "I merely took a little of the conceit out of Richard Courtenay. That young man may be handsome, but he is very much spoiled. He's been having his own way with women too much."

The screen actress looked the speaker over.

"Why, I thought you were in love with him, Alice," she cried.

"So did I," the latter retorted. "And then I woke up to find that I don't care even a little bit for him. No wonder Hollywood has a rotten reputation if all movie actors are like him."

"But what's wrong with him?" Gloria demanded. "What has he done to you that you should——"

"Listen old dear," Alice interrupted. "I don't have to tell you what is wrong with him. Every woman who met him in a more or less intimate way knows that. And so do you. But," she added quickly when she saw a wave of crimson creep into her former schoolmate's cheeks, "I didn't mean to hurt you. If I have, I am sorry."

"You haven't hurt me," said the other, though the color was still in her cheeks. "Only—only I regret that Richard Courtenay caused you to change your ideas about Hollywood."

Alice put an arm around Gloria's waist and hugged her.

"Please, let us not discuss Courtenay further," she begged. "No man ever disillusioned me as he did. I don't want to go into details. They are too painful. And now that this is over, I want to tell you that I am planning to go home to-morrow."

"What, you're going home so sudden?" the movie star cried. "Why, I won't let you. You haven't seen half of it."

"I think I saw quite enough, my dear girl."

"But I have accepted an invitation for you to go to a dance to-morrow night," protested Gloria. "And you'll be surprised when I tell you who is giving it."

Mrs. Gordon's curiosity was instantly aroused.

"Who?"

"Mark Sperber."

"What, he? And you intend to go? I thought you told me that he is the most——"

"I know I told you that." Miss Marsdon broke in. "And he is. But there isn't a single woman or man, for that matter, in Hollywood who would refuse to go to any social affair given by him. For one thing Mark Sperber

lives in a veritable palace. As a host no other multi-millionaire can hold a candle to him. Besides, he is a man who nevers forgets a slight.

"He wields an almost uncanny power over this whole movie colony," Miss Marsdon went on. "While I don't like his personality, I can't afford to offend him. He called at the studio for the sole purpose of inviting me. And he insisted that I bring my lovely friend, meaning you, of course."

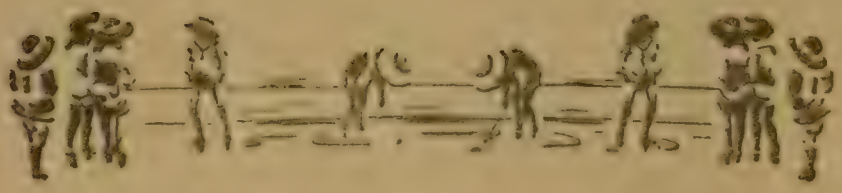
Alice took a few turns up and down the room. Her eyes had narrowed until they were mere slits.

The expression on her face could scarcely be called pleasant. It was the expression of one whose thoughts were traveling through a forbidden channel.

Miss Marsdon calmly sat down at the table and looked over some of the invitations to social affairs. At length she spoke again.

"You'll stay and go to the dance with me, won't you?" she coaxed. "I'll promise you that you will have the time of your life. Mark Sperber always has a tremendous surprise in store for his guests."

"Alright, I'll go!" exclaimed Alice with a twisted smile.



Chapter 82

THE RESCUE.

IT took the courage of a real man to face the situation such as Guy Fillmore found himself confronted with in that lonely farmhouse in the wilds of Maine. He would have felt a great deal easier had he been alone, for a woman usually is a handicap in a fight.

While Ruth Gordon had promised to obey his instructions, he doubted that she would run from the scene of battle the moment he ordered her to do so.

Love had welded them together, and Ruth was not the girl to seek personal safety at this stage of the game.

The room in which they stood was dark. Heavy footsteps were coming nearer and nearer. A streak of light penetrated under the door. The man approaching was evidently carrying a lamp.

Ruth Gordon crept closer to young Fillmore and touched his arm. Both were holding their breath.

Then, abruptly, the light disappeared, and the man in the hall swore. The language he used proclaimed his type.

"Red!" he bellowed.

"What's the matter now?" demanded his companion from below.

"Bring the search-light. This damned lamp blew out."

"Wait a minute," the other shouted. "The water on the kitchen stove is boiling over. I'll have to tend to that first."

Fillmore turned to Ruth.

"Listen," he whispered. "Those two fellows have separated, and this is our chance. The motor of their car outside is still running. I am going to jump the man in the hall. When I do, you make a dash for the car——"

"But—but you?" she demanded quickly.

"I'll keep the man downstairs busy long enough for you to get away," he promised grimly.

The girl shook her head.

"Please, do as I tell you," he begged.

"If you think I am going to leave you in this crisis you have another guess coming," Ruth replied with some indignation.

"You must do as I say," Guy commanded, and though his voice was still a whisper, it sounded like a shout to her. "It is the only way. And it will be easy enough. I'll knock that bird in the hall cold and you beat it outside while I trim his pal downstairs."

"I won't leave you," she said with decision.

"Please do so for my sake, Ruth." He seized her by the arm and opened the door.

As Fillmore did this, he noticed that the man with the lamp was not in the hall at all, but half way up the stairs.

He noticed also that he was holding the lamp with his left hand, while with the other he was trying to scratch a match. The next instant he jumped.

Vaulting down the rickety stairs he landed fairly and squarely on top of the big brute. They went down into the hall together with a crash that shook the house.

"I've got him, Ruth!" shouted Fillmore. "Get out —quick!"

But Ruth Gordon never stirred. She stood as she could never have pictured herself standing by any stretch of the imagination.

Her hands were pressed over her heart, which

seemed to have stopped beating.

Then, suddenly, an electric torch flashed on in the hall below. It revealed Guy Fillmore pinning down his gigantic adversary but left her in the dark.

Just then the other outlaw came running from the kitchen. His one hand held an ugly looking gun.

"Get up!" he commanded with an oath.

There was nothing for Guy to do but obey. He rose, but his adversary did not.

"Hold up your hands and keep them up!" was the next command. "No foolishness now. If you try any of that stuff I'll fill you full of lead!"

Again Fillmore obeyed. He knew that Ruth Gordon had lost her chance to reach the outside, and he could have wept. There was but one thing to do. He could not attack the man with the gun, for the latter looked too determined and too vicious.

Hoping against hope, he attempted to spar for time.

"What good would it do you to shoot me?" he asked plaintively. "The chances are you'd miss me. You can't trust a gun at close range."

"Cut the comedy," advised the outlaw. "Now I want the truth about this thing. You didn't come alone. Where is the rest of your gang? Come clean now and make it snappy."

This was Fillmore's cue. This man evidently took it for granted that he was a member of a gang of bootleggers or hi-jackers, come in search of a cargo of liquor.

"They're outside," he lied. "And if I were you I'd be careful with that gun. There's seven of them coming and they are coming fast."

"Is that so?" snarled the other. "Well, I don't care a damn how many there are coming, but I'll get you first. believe me. If you got any prayers to say, say them

now and say them fast."

Then he fired point blank—and missed.

But the fact that he missed was not due to his lack of marksmanship. During his argument with Guy Fillmore, Ruth Gordon had slipped noiselessly down the stairs.

Evading the bright shaft from the search-light, she had circled around until she stood directly behind the outlaw.

In a corner stood a club which evidently had seen much use, and which had been built purposely to crack human skulls. With both hands she seized it, and brought it down upon the brute's head not a second too soon.

Guy Fillmore saw the man fall. He saw the automatic gun and the searchlight both roll on the floor. With a swift movement he retrieved them.

The girl, fired with the lust of battle, apparently was not satisfied with the timely punishment she had already inflicted upon the outlaw. Dropping the club, she began beating him with both fists.

"Quit, Ruth!" cried Fillmore. "Quit!"

But the girl did not even hear him. She continued to attack the bewildered man with a fury never seen in a woman so young.

Then Guy gripped her by the shoulders and pulled her off.

She glanced up at him, breathless and a little dazed. And what a beautiful picture she made in her unbridled wrath.

"Why, he was going to shoot you," she murmured.

"He might have shot you," replied Fillmore. "Get behind me now."

The girl obeyed in silence.

"Now get up," Guy addressed the outlaw.

Continued in next number

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